

COMMUNICATIONS

To the Editor of the WILSON BULLETIN: May I suggest to your readers as an unusually interesting subject for field-study the inter-relationships of breeding Purple and Bronzed Grackles in any part of that area, from Massachusetts to Louisiana (and probably Texas), where these two species hybridize.

When I began a study of these birds, forty-odd years ago (Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist., Vol. IV, 1892, pp. 1-20), transportation facilities were comparatively limited and I had but few specimens and fewer field-notes from the region mentioned. Today, the field-student with a motor car at his command, defies distance. I hope, therefore, that he will defy it early during the coming breeding season and visit grackle colonies anywhere in the region I have referred to, but especially in the lower Mississippi Valley and more especially in southwestern Louisiana and northeastern Texas.

Full series of males should be secured and when the collector has finished his own researches, I should be greatly obliged if he would loan these birds, and any other pertinent material to me for resumption of the studies I began in 1891 and continued at the last A. O. U. meeting.

Yours truly,

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February 14, 1934.

To the Editor: The Editor's Note on page 207-8 of the December, 1933, WILSON BULLETIN is of great interest to anyone who, like the writer, must judge other people's sight-records—an invidious, seldom-dared, but indispensable service to Ornithology! While I agree with the tenor of this Note, my experience has shown that there is peril in *any* departure from the "verifiable specimen" rule. Last spring, for instance, a strange bird appeared at a farm in West Springfield, Massachusetts. The first bird-student who saw it, a woman of long experience, with several unique but believable sight-records to her credit, identified it as an Arkansas Kingbird, and as such it was accepted by a great many observers during the next two days, who compared it with the plate in *The Birds of Massachusetts*. It seems that I was the only bird-student in this region who had ever *seen* an Arkansas Kingbird, and not until it had stayed three days was I taken to see this one. A long search was necessary, on a numbingly cold morning, and I almost missed it. If I had, if the wanderer had disappeared, a letter, already written and shown me, would have been sent to *The Auk*, recording the *first vernal* Arkansas Kingbird ever occurring in New England. Confirmed by numerous witnesses, this would undoubtedly have been accepted and passed into "science". But the moment I set eyes on the bird I knew it was *not* an Arkansas Kingbird but either a Fork-tailed or Scissor-tailed Flycatcher—I could not say which as I had never seen either and had no distinct memory of their pictures. Reference to books immediately showed that it was a female Scissor-tail. Collected next day (April 29), it is now mounted in the Boston Museum of Natural History.

That was an instance of a conspicuously-marked, easily identifiable species being mistaken, from lack of prior acquaintance, by several truly expert amateurs—by which I mean students who know only living birds. On the other hand, what can we make of a still more recent local record like this? A well-grounded scientist, with thorough acquaintance (in Greenland) with the Black Guillemot, is traveling from Worcester to Springfield on January 2, 1934. His bus stops close to a narrow stream, and he sees through its window, within forty or fifty yards, three Black Guillemots lying on the ice at the edge of the current and a fourth moving awkwardly, characteristically, beside them. One of the prone ones is mostly or wholly in summer plumage. He does not note the red legs but recognizes the species instantly. The bus drives on, no other bird-student can confirm the record—and the Black Guillemot has *never before*, that I can find, been seen on fresh water anywhere in Massachusetts. These birds were sixty-five or seventy miles from the sea (Boston Harbor). Are they recordable?

The editor rightly stresses the preservation of verifiable specimens. Several Rails shot here in the 1880s were then recorded as the Clapper. Re-examination, a generation later, of two fortunately existing skins showed them to be the King. Specimens of a Plover taken in 1884 were then listed, warily, as "Piping or Ring-neck". Lower on the same page they were referred to as "Ring-neck", but since "Piping" had been mentioned first, and its scientific name, only, added, the next recorder of Amherst birds took this as establishing the occurrence of the Piping Plover there, and all our bird-books have copied from him; so when another small Plover was collected many years later it was thus identified. Now the 1884 skins have disappeared but the later one is an immature Semi-palmated Plover, and since many sight-records of that species but none whatever of the Piping have recently accumulated, all the Piping Plover records founded on the 1884 ambiguity must be discredited.

As to the relative identifiability of subspecies and species, I must differ from the editor. In these parts, where subspecies do not much bother us, it is *easier* to distinguish the two races of Black Duck than the two species of Scaup, or females of the two Golden-eyes or of the American and King Eiders. It is *much* easier to tell extreme examples of Acadian and Nelson's Sparrows (subspecies) apart, than silent Flycatchers (species) of the genus *Empidonax*. It is no harder to distinguish the Prairie from the Northern Horned Lark than the Olive-backed from the Gray-cheeked Thrush; and the two forms of Palm Warbler seem as unlike as the two water-thrushes. In the West, what with intergrades, etc., this is doubtless untrue, but there as well as here a number of "paired species" must occur which tax the discrimination of the field observer.

Humanity's aptitude for error is infinite.

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